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The Duel

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Students at the Almas academy confront personal challenges and discovery. And while all Jedi receive some combat training, a few make it their central focus. After all, personal struggles are not the only battles in the galaxy, and sometimes, upholding peace requires refined skills in aggressive negotiations. Learn more in our latest supplement to the Living Force campaign.

Once again, the wandering eye returns to Almas, where the towers of the stone academy of the Jedi reach up to the stars like the fingers of a grasping hand. This analogy is not inappropriate. Against this backdrop, hundreds of students from many species have struggled to find and break through their limits, all of them reaching to better their grasp of the universe.

The Almas Academy has often fallen under scrutiny for its unorthodox methods. It accepts Padawans as adults. It takes in those tainted by the dark side and trusts them to overcome its shadow. It even allows its Jedi to seek their own path in the Cularin system rather than insisting that they follow the academy's mandates. These methods have drawn criticism and attack over the years, but Master Lanius Qel-Bertuk has guided the institution with a steady hand, secure in the belief that his way is the right one.

"Many are the flaws of the Jedi," say some of the Council on Coruscant. "They are prideful and too sure of themselves." Master Qel-Bertuk might be one of those they speak of, but his belief has guided the lives of many heroes. If he works from pride, then perhaps pride, mixed with wisdom, can still lead to something great.

With her many hands, E1-6RA set down two plates, a bowl, and a cup of steaming dark liquid on the stone desk in front of her. The droid's head swiveled silently, looking around the office for any sign of her master. Once again, he was not present, as he should have been for meal time. Prepared for this, E1 opened several collapsible plastic memory domes and set them over the repast. Moving away gracefully, the droid chattered to herself, speculating about what her master might have been doing. She didn't understand organics, especially her often-illogical master, Lanius.

Nearby, Master Lanius's actions confirmed E1-6RA's suspicions. His lightsaber arced upward to clash with the sudden thrust from his sparring partner. The two energy blades locked for a moment as their beams tried violently to combine, sparked angrily, and blazed with light. Blue on purple, the radiance silhouetted Lanius and Darrus in the heart of the darkened fighting hall.

Normally, the hall was filled with students either practicing or seated in its many carved chairs. Master Devan ran a tight ship where her lightsaber combat classes were concerned. Under her steady care, students learned the fine art of defending themselves and others. Anyone not observing or working through techniques wasn't allowed in the hall at all.

Today, however, the hall had been reserved by Master Jeht. He had asked Lanius and Devan to join him so he could evaluate their performance with a blade. Though Devan assumed that Master Lanius would decline, she was pleasantly surprised to see him in attendance as she arrived. She stood in the arched doorway of the room for a moment, watching them fight.

It was a brilliant dance of light and shadow. Both Masters were experts with a lightsaber; that much was evident almost before Devan began to study their techniques. As they slashed and parried, she observed how they conserved their energy -- nothing but clean lines of attack and defense. Lanius was as impressive as always, his brown robes swirling as he wove a glowing web of energy around himself to ward off the incoming blows of his opponent. None of Master Jeht's attacks came close to connecting with him.

Just then, Lanius stepped back and turned off his lightsaber. Darrus immediately pulled his own weapon back, turned it off, and stood at the ready. "Sir?"

"I have no desire to continue this duel if you insist on holding back, Master Jeht." Lanius looked annoyed, though not overly so, as he started to return his saber to the wide leather belt around his waist. "I am missing a meal for this, and I do not wish to be scolded by my droid for no good reason."

Darrus nodded and re-ignited his blade. Its violet light washed over his face as he raised it in salute. "My apologies, sir. I wanted to evaluate your skills, and I was afraid I could not do that if the contest ended too quickly."

Lanius chuckled. "Oh, really? I don't think so." His weapon leaped off his belt and into his hand of its own accord, hissing to life. "Ready to fight me with everything you have now?"

A quick nod was the only reply. It was enough. Lanius launched himself into the duel, and a moment later, he was on the ground, his saber thrown across the room, a long shaft of purple light angled down toward his throat.

Devan blinked. It had happened so quickly that even her Jedi perception had difficulty following the action.

Master Qel-Bertuk, still gasping from the kick to his stomach, looked up the humming blade at Darrus into his utterly black eyes. "I stand corrected." Then he added, with a wry smile, "That is, if I am allowed to stand again."

The lightsaber flickered into darkness as Darrus helped Lanius to his feet. "I am sorry, sir. It was not proper of me to introduce physical attacks into the duel. I will refrain from that in the future."

Lanius walked over and picked up his lightsaber, and then gestured for

Devan - - still standing in the archway - - to enter. "Not a concern, Master Jeht. I asked you to give me all you had. You did. I see nothing to apologize for." He clicked the weapon onto his belt again. "Perhaps Devan here will be more of a challenge for you."

Darrus nodded, and life flared into his lightsaber again. "The other reason I was holding back was because she had not arrived yet. With your permission, sir, I would like to begin the evaluation now."

Lanius and Devan looked first at each other, and then at the black-robed Jedi in the middle of the training hall. "But you just definitely finished with me," said Lanius. "Do you mean to test Master Devan next?"

Devan shrugged out of her over-robe and hefted her unlit lightsaber with a sure and steady hand.

Darrus shook his head. "No, sir. I mean to begin the evaluation of you both. If you come to either side of the circle, we can begin."

Devan scoffed. "Master Jeht, you overextend yourself. I commend your skill, but surely you do not mean to take on both of us at once? One weapon against two is not a fair contest." She moved as she spoke, however, shadowing Lanius as he stepped to Darrus's far left side.

Master Jeht nodded. "I agree." He reached out to the pile of robes he'd shed before entering the circle with Master Qel-Bertuk. There was a rustle of silk as something hurtled toward him. The finely wrapped hilt of a long, curved metal blade slapped hard into his gloved hand. Its scabbard slid off gracefully and returned to the pile, revealing a midnight-colored sword with a slightly waved temper line down its edge. A soft echo sounded down its length, a whisper of a song that filled the fighting hall with a faint, almost subliminal, melody.

Devan's eyes widened as Darrus pointed the beautiful weapon at her chest. She could see his face through the stained glass panels of its cross guard, a disc in the shape of a blazing comet chasing its own tail. Nodding acceptance to the challenge, she gave life to her lightsaber and moved forward cautiously. On Darrus's other side, Lanius followed her lead and together, they attacked.